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ENGLISH LITERATURE AND THE COLLEGE FRESHMAN

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Until recently we have accepted with little hesitation the assumption that a man with a college education might boast of particular intellectual attainments; probably he would have a good, usable knowledge of some definite line of work, but undoubtedly he must have acquired a background of general culture from which would emerge a wealth of facts and associated ideas to enrich the experience of the passing years. Of late, however, we have been forced to question both clauses of this assumption. On no one point, for example, has there been more open and irate criticism of collegiate education than in regard to the knowledge of the English language and literature possessed by the average college graduate of today. A partial explanation of this condition is to be found in recent changes in college policies, but a portion of the blame must undoubtedly be laid at the door of the preparatory school.

In breaking away from the rigid requirements of the old college curriculum there has evidently been difficulty in avoiding the opposite extreme; the university that now requires no Latin beyond Cicero, and no mathematics beyond plane geometry, has tended also to eliminate all required work in English literature, on the ground that the secondary schools have given to that subject a sufficient proportion of their time. The results of this policy have been unsatisfactory to many, both within and without the college classroom. There are indications, however, that the pendulum is beginning to swing back: the murmured protests are continually growing stronger against the commercialization of education, overspecialization, and carrying into the university the limitations of the trade school. Old alumni are realizing that their sons come back from Alma Mater, glib and self-sufficient, but lacking some of those invaluable acquirements which the college had made possible for the older generation. And in many cases

the colleges themselves are ready to question or even to condemn the feebleness of their fight against the unwitting crudity of the student body. It is noteworthy that in an institution like Tufts College, the faculty of the School of Engineering should recently have expressed itself as feeling the necessity of more work in English in its engineering course.

Interested by these signs of the times, and incidentally depressed by the lack of previous training apparent in a college class in Freshman English, I planned one day an experiment which should be a partial test of the knowledge of English literature with which these students had entered college, and raise the question of how far the college can safely intrust to the high school at present the greater share in the teaching of English literature. In the beginning I was moved more by curiosity than by scientific inquiry, and I did not give to the details of my plan such careful deliberation as I should have given had I foreseen the interesting character of the results. The experiment was as follows: To a class made up of fifty Freshman girls of average age and training in a small college of the Middle West I gave, first, the following list of names chosen from among the greatest masters of English literature since Chaucer:

George Eliot	Thackeray
Chaucer	Fielding
Dr. Johnson	Wordsworth
Shakespeare	Rossetti
Coleridge	Spenser
Milton	Matthew Arnold
Byron	Browning
Ben Jonson	Dickens
Pope	Jane Austen
Scott	Tennyson
Dryden	Keats

In connection with this list, I asked two things. (1) the half-century in which the writer lived; and (2) the title of any one of his writings. When the students had completed this work I gave another list, of the following titles:

Pendennis (Thackeray)
 The Blessed Damozel (Rossetti)
 Canterbury Tales (Chaucer)

The Mill on the Floss (George Eliot)
 Lycidas (Milton)
 The Faerie Queene (Spenser)
 Tintern Abbey (Wordsworth)
 The Essay on Man (Pope)
 Christabel (Coleridge)
 Adonais (Shelley)
 The Rape of the Lock (Pope)
 The Ode to the West Wind (Shelley)
 Childe Harold (Byron)
 My Last Duchess (Browning)
 Ode on the Intimations of Immortality (Wordsworth)
 Alexander's Feast (Dryden)
 The Eve of St. Agnes (Keats)
 Sohrab and Rustum (Arnold)
 Ode on a Grecian Urn (Keats)
 In Memoriam (Tennyson)
 The Prisoner of Chillon (Byron)
 Rabbi Ben Ezra (Browning)
 Idylls of the King (Tennyson)
 King Lear (Shakespeare)

Then I asked the class to give on the other side of the paper, and without consulting the first list, the author of each of these English masterpieces. These papers were collected at once, and the reading of them, an hour later, moved me first to mirth, and then to sadness, and finally to sober thought. The results of the two tests are tabulated in the accompanying charts, A representing the answers to the first test, and B, to the second.

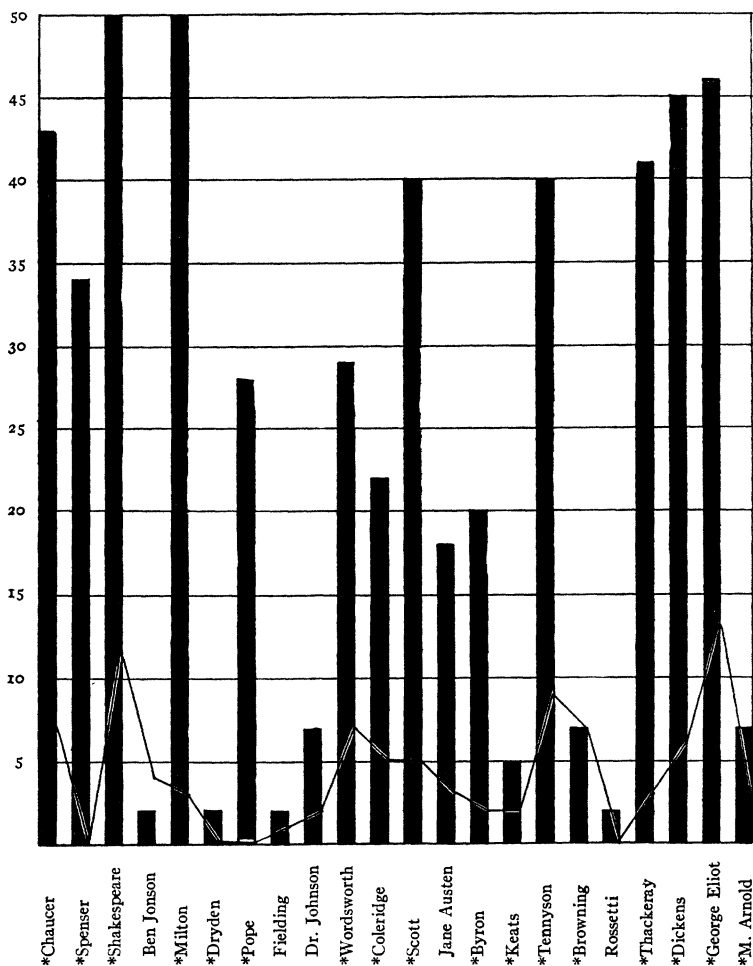
In judging these results one should bear three things in mind: first, my questions asked merely for an association of author and title, not for any knowledge of the contents of the work; second, these names of authors and works, the commonplaces of literary history, were, in the majority of cases, taken from the established lists of college-entrance requirements in English for the year 1911-12; third, the question on chronology asked only for a broad approximation to the date of writing, such as seemed inherent in any understanding of the work in relation to its time.

A survey of these results suggests to me certain important conclusions regarding the teaching of English in the high school and in the college, in connection with the average general culture

of the student body. In the first place, as regards secondary education the charts show two conditions: that the teaching of

CHART A

Showing the percentage of students who were able to give the title of any one of the author's writings. The curve shows the percentage who could give the half-century in which the author lived.



* College entrance requirements.

English in the high schools is failing in certain things which it should be expected to accomplish; and that other things which the

high-school course legitimately leaves untouched have rarely come into the student's experience from any other source before entering college.

Perhaps a few words should be said as to the nature of the college-entrance requirements in English by which most high schools are governed. There are two phases of the work: first, the reading of ten pieces of literature: two of Shakespeare's plays, one specimen each of English prose and English poetry previous to the nineteenth century, two specimens each of prose and poetry within the nineteenth century, and two novels. The specimens read in each case are to be chosen from certain carefully selected groups. The second phase of the work consists of more intensive study of a play, a group of poems, an oration, and an essay, also chosen from established groups. In my list, seventeen out of twenty-two writers were chosen from these groups.

A comparison of Charts A and B at a few points shows significantly what the high school has and has not done in certain particulars. In the cases of only two authors—Shakespeare and Milton—could every student mention the title of one work. The answers in regard to Shakespeare show some variety of information, though *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Julius Caesar* appear most frequently. Of Milton's works, many students mentioned *Paradise Lost*, but only about 65 per cent could tell the author of "Lycidas," though that poem is on the "study and practice" list. The authors receiving above 75 per cent of correct answers were Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Scott, Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot, and Tennyson—all on the required list. Less than 25 per cent of the students, however, could give correct answers in regard to Ben Jonson, Dr. Johnson, Fielding, Rossetti, Dryden, Pope, Keats, Browning, and Arnold, although the last five are among the great names in English poetry and are found on the college-entrance list. Apparently the titles *Canterbury Tales*, *The Rape of the Lock*, and *Childe Harold* are more familiar than the names of their authors, for in the case of each the students were better able to supply the author's name when the title was given, than to respond to the reverse test. This greater facility was due, doubtless, partly to the associative processes set up by reflecting on the

first list. It should be noted that the results of the questions on Wordsworth as plotted are misleading, for in every case the title given was that of one of three poems memorized in another class the preceding semester. The number of correct answers to the questions on Thackeray was also probably augmented by the fact that another class, at the time of the test, was reading *Vanity Fair* and discussing it widely.

In every case the writers with whom the students were most familiar are on the list of college-entrance requirements, but observe that other writers, on the requirement list, were strikingly unfamiliar to a large number of the students; for example, less than 50 per cent were able to tell the title of one poem by Dryden, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Browning, Rossetti, or Matthew Arnold. It would seem that the high schools, in selecting from the established groups, are systematically neglecting lyric poetry, though parts of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics* are included in both the groups of poetry selected. Results from the second test (illustrated in Chart B) show that the poetry best known is in nearly every case narrative poetry: *The Rape of the Lock*, *Childe Harold*, *The Idylls of the King*. The prominence of the two elegies, "Lycidas" and "In Memoriam," is an interesting exception to this rule. Since the latter is not on the required list, one wonders whether the acquaintance with it is due to the significance of its title, or to the appeal of its content to the emotional, introspective mood of adolescence.

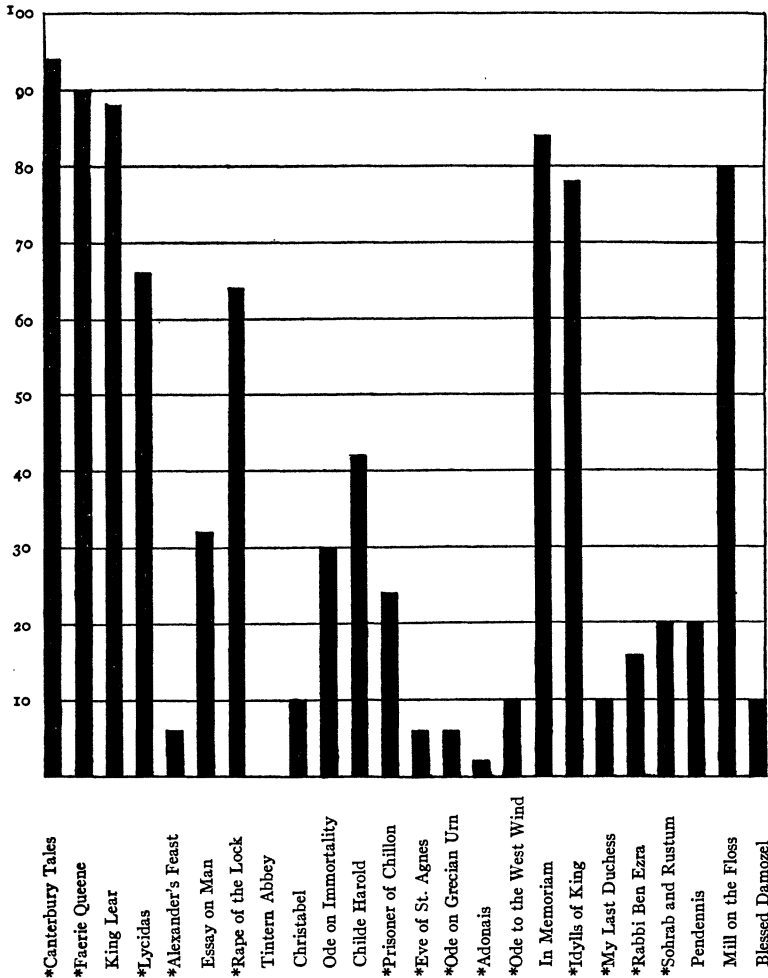
The familiarity of 80 per cent of the students with *The Mill on the Floss* is also noteworthy and hopeful, since that novel is not on the required list, and, in the first test, the large percentage of correct answers to the questions on George Eliot had been augmented by the recollections of *Silas Marner*, which is a required book. In the case of Scott, however, an overwhelming majority of the answers gave *The Lady of the Lake*, *Ivanhoe*, and *Quentin Durward*, all listed among the requirements. In regard to Dickens there was much greater variety, showing either that this novelist makes a more popular appeal than the others or that the peculiarity of his titles causes them to be more easily remembered.

The chronology line is significant but depressing. Any com-

mand of even approximate dates seems startlingly rare; many students made no effort at all to give a date, and the random

CHART B

Showing the percentage of students who were able to give the author of the work.



* College entrance requirements.

guesses of those who were bold but ignorant are shockingly incongruous. For instance, in the case of Chaucer only seven students out of fifty could give an approximate date, while the sporadic

guesses ranged from "the first half of the first century" to the eighteenth. It is hard to believe that many teachers present the *Canterbury Tales* without devoting some time to historical background; but this kind of work, apparently, has in too many cases been either strikingly ineffectual or altogether lacking. Again, with Spenser, though 90 per cent of the students remembered him as the author of *The Faerie Queene*, yet none could give an approximate date; apparently there was in their minds no connection of Spenser with the Elizabethan period, or even with his great contemporary, Shakespeare. Few, indeed, could locate even Shakespeare with any accuracy. I was horrified at the lack of any conception of periods of history and social background when I read, on different papers, that Shakespeare lived in "the last half of the eighteenth century" or "the first half of the nineteenth," Milton in the nineteenth and thirteenth centuries, and Wordsworth and Tennyson in the sixteenth.

Certain conclusions, then, these data seem to indicate in regard to the high-school training in English literature with which the students are entering—and perhaps leaving—college. In the case of the majority of its students, the high school has succeeded in developing some measure of familiarity with Chaucer and the *Canterbury Tales*, Shakespeare and certain dramas, Spenser and the *Faerie Queene*, Milton, Coleridge, Tennyson, Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot, and Scott. So far as this familiarity with these six poets and four novelists is at all definite and accurate, that accomplishment is in no wise to be disparaged. Two criticisms of the work as a whole, however, the data seem to justify: first, that there is too little emphasis laid on the matter of historical relations, by such a study of the background of a piece of literature as should add to the vividness of the student's interest and understanding of the work as a whole; and secondly, that there is apparently a widespread tendency on the part of the high school to neglect the study of lyric poetry. Perhaps this is due both to the fact that lyric poetry in some ways requires more delicate handling on the part of the teacher than narrative poetry, and also to the fact that narrative poetry is more attractive to boys, and to girls of non-literary taste. Yet educational psychology

seems to indicate that, if properly taught, the lyric, with its personal note, and idealistic beauty, should make an appeal to the adolescent mind; and that such poetry should have a desirable influence in refining and defining the ideas and sentiments of that period of storm and stress.

Yet even though the high school should do all that could be expected of it, there would obviously be much left for the college to do, in filling in the gaps in even the barest survey of English poetry and prose. It is evident that little in the way of general knowledge and literary background gained outside of school can be expected from the average high-school graduate or college Freshman. To him, Rossetti, Jane Austen, *Pendennis*, the *Essay on Man*, or *Tintern Abbey*—none of which we require or desire our high schools to teach—must often remain a closed book unless the college brings them to his notice. The college, then, must face the responsibility either of opening or of neglecting to open to its students a large proportion of the wealth of English literature: material which has hitherto been assumed the common property of every educated man, material so familiar a century ago that a writer of the day might quote with easy liberality and trust his readers to recognize his source without definite record of indebtedness.

As yet, however, it is evident that the high schools are not doing all that might be expected of them in their teaching of English, particularly in the smaller towns of the Middle West. Many of my students state that they have used throughout their high-school courses one of two or three standard textbooks on English literature—they have “been through” Halleck, or Pancoast, or Moody and Lovett, as the case may be. Perhaps the way in which many of them “went through” is indicated by the remark of one of my students: she said that, though she could answer hardly any of my questions, they had “learned by heart just hundreds of those things in high school!” Some of the answers I received would suggest that many a heart failed at this crucial moment, for a direful mingling of English and American literature, distorted fact and meaningless fiction, is displayed in the statements that Browning wrote “Snowbound,” Tennyson “The Bare-

foot Boy," Byron "The Cotter's Saturday Night," Dryden *The Vicar of Wakefield*, and "Scott wrote the *Arabian Nights* in the sixteenth century!" The authorship of "Adonais" was variously assigned to Shakespeare, Dryden, Keats, Tennyson, Byron, and Pope; "Christabel" to Ben Jonson, Fielding, and Browning; the *Essay on Man* to Milton, Bacon, Darwin, Dr. Johnson, Byron, and Emerson; while Wordsworth was accused of writing "Grey's Elegy," "The Children's Hour," and "Thanatopsis."

With this mass of misinformation left in many students' minds by the high-school course; with the great field of lyric poetry practically untouched—though not unrequired; and with a rich and spacious field remaining rightfully the domain of the college, wherein lies the study of other works not less great by the authors of the *Canterbury Tales*, *Julius Caesar*, and "Lycidas"; with all this misinformation and ignorance entering its gates with every Freshman class, can the college afford to cut down its required work in English literature?

As a final consideration, whether it stand for classical or technical training, for general culture or intelligent specialization, any institution should value for its students the study of literature not only for content, but quite as much for the practical influence of form. We clamor for men and women who can speak and write their own language effectively, yet we put before them few examples of excellence. It is by familiar association with the masters of language, it is by the acquisition through reading of an effectual stock of words, phrases, idioms, and cadences that a student most surely obtains an appreciation of verbal beauty and discriminating statement, and develops an efficient vehicle for his own expression.